

Developing a Framework to Support Healthy Aging for Rural Seniors

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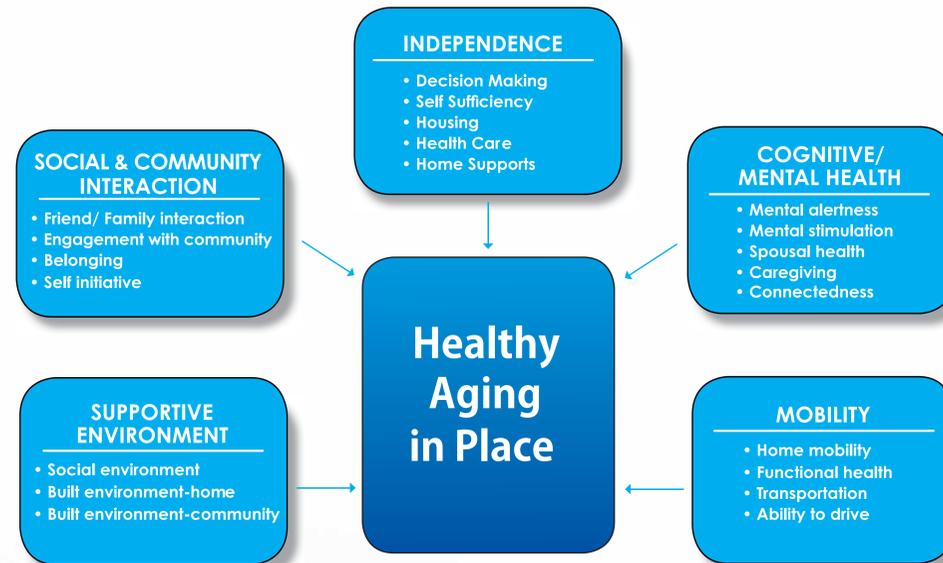
PROJECT OVERVIEW

There is a growing uncertainty around the ability of rural areas to support and maintain healthy aging in place (Eberhard & Pamuk, 2004). As policy makers and community leaders address the aging demographic in many rural communities, it is important to understand rural older adults' perceptions of healthy aging in place. In Saskatchewan the proportion of those over 65 years is projected to increase from 14.6% in 2011 to 23.3% in 2036 (HRSDC, 2013) and many rural communities currently have a higher proportion of seniors than the overall provincial average.

To date, little research exists on community-level interventions that support rural healthy aging in place (Skinner et al, 2008). Kirby and LeBreton (2002) note that often "rural health issues tend to be eclipsed by those in urban areas... policy solutions often are based on experiences in urban areas and rely on urban data and research." Our project, *Healthy Aging in Place*, focused on assessing interventions that support healthy aging in place through a 3-year longitudinal qualitative study with seniors in several rural communities in Saskatchewan. Findings from our study identified a number of actions to support rural seniors' independence and ability to age in place at three levels, including policy, community and kin-level interventions (Bacsu et al., 2014; Jeffery et al., 2013).

METHODS

Our approach builds on our experience in developing community-based research frameworks and indicators with northern Saskatchewan communities (Jeffery et al., 2006). Guided by community-based research, we completed the initial assessment framework based on findings from individual interviews with rural community-dwelling seniors. Focus groups were conducted with rural seniors, service providers and policy makers to review the initial framework and ensure relevancy of the domains and indicators. In addition, a literature review of existing healthy aging frameworks was conducted to augment the development of the framework. The final outcome will be a tool kit style workbook that will include the assessment framework in an accessible format to be used by community leaders and policy makers.



FRAMEWORK DOMAINS

- **Independence** refers to the ability to live self-sufficiently and have freedom in one's life. The ability for seniors to have control over decisions in their lives and continue to be self sufficient as they age are aspects of supporting independence. The sense of independence is affected by the opportunities for a range of housing options in the community including assisted living options. Access to health care and home care supports are additional dimensions of independence.
- **Social & Community Interaction** is defined as both the ability and opportunities to interact with family and friends and be involved, engaged and participate in a range of personal and community activities. Social interaction focuses on the nature and extent of family and friend interactions and highlights the importance of reciprocity, caring interactions and a sense of belonging.
- **Supportive Environment** includes both social and physical aspects that provide the setting for supporting aging in place. The social environment includes opportunities in the home and community for participating in activities that will support social interaction. The built environment in the home and community environment address issues related to the quality of sidewalks and streets for walking, accessible buildings with ramps, and accessibility of public buildings. Built environment for rural older adults is often described in terms of safety, accessibility, proximity and convenience.
- **Mobility** refers to the ability to physically move and be mobile within one's home and community. Mobility was conceptualized as encompassing functional health including one's ability to move and perform desired tasks without pain or injury. Mobility is influenced by environmental aspects that support seniors' interaction with others.
- **Cognitive/Mental Health** is defined by seniors as activities and supports that facilitate both emotional wellbeing and keeping the mind sharp. Both mental alertness and mental stimulation are supported through participation in physical activities such as exercise and reading the newspaper and doing puzzles. Spousal health, grief/loss, caregiving, finances, isolation and functional health are highlighted as dimensions that can affect the mental health of rural seniors.

RURAL HEALTHY AGING ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK

One outcome of this research is the development of the *Rural Healthy Aging Assessment Framework* which highlights the direct perspectives of rural older adults. The assessment framework aims to identify, evaluate and monitor the impact of interventions on rural seniors' ability to age in place. The assessment framework is a work in progress and focuses on establishing key indicators to measure the impact of policy, community, and kin-level interventions on rural seniors' health, and more specifically, identifying what interventions support healthy aging in place.



NEXT STEPS (2014 - 2017)

The Rural Healthy Aging Assessment Framework provides the foundation for three priority projects to be conducted in collaboration with several Saskatchewan communities. These three projects consist of population health interventions that support rural older adults' ability to remain independent and live within their own homes and communities for as long as they choose to do so.

1. Improving Rural Seniors' Mobility and Social Interaction through Intervention Research
2. Supporting Healthy Aging through Walkable Built Environment
3. Addressing Rural Seniors' Access to Information



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